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DISCUSSION OF  
THE NEW TOWNS PROGRAM IN  
GREAT BRITAIN

*(Published in March, 1951)*

By W. Strickler, and Thomas C. Coate

CITY PLANNING DIVISION

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reference, and date of publication by the Society are given.

## DISCUSSION

W. STRICKLER<sup>8</sup>.—President Thomas Jefferson called large cities the cancer growth of mankind. Should large cities be dissolved? Would such a step be possible under the conditions of the modern way of life—a product of industrialization? The British answer to these questions is lucidly represented in the paper, provoking thoughts beyond the scope of the problem analyzed in it.

Cities, with very few exceptions, have always grown naturally, according to their inherent needs. In Europe the “planned city” was a rare flower planted by order of an absolute monarch. For two hundred years, no planned cities were built in Europe until their revival as British garden cities, first proposed by Ebenezer Howard,<sup>9</sup> who borrowed his ideology from Jean Jacques Rousseau, the advocate of “back to nature.” The direct contact between man and mother earth is the ancient basis not only of work and life but also of housing.

The writer does not know a single case in which Mr. Howard’s basic idea found full realization. Mr. Howard’s demand was for a unified city in which the citizen, rooted in the earth, lives and works. The modern garden cities, even those visualized by Mr. Howard were never completely self sufficient but were rather “sleep-cities,” in which the breadwinner lived and rested for a short time after hard work in the city and tiresome commuting. The demand for harmony between work, housing, and recreation, which was fulfilled in pre-industrial towns, cannot be satisfied in the modern city.

Great Britain did not suffer from a housing shortage as much as the other European countries. Nevertheless, its planners have been anxious to “unload” its large cities in the next 20 years by building 14 new towns: 12 in England and Wales plus 2 in Scotland. The construction of eight new towns, around London, within a 30-mile circle is being planned, based on city development laws promulgated in 1946 and 1948. The planning agencies in London believe that during the coming 20 years, 1,000,000 persons will have to be resettled to unload the great cities.

When studying postwar city planning in Great Britain, the history of city development must be kept in mind in order to recognize the planning developed in an ideological rather than in a technical manner. Great Britain, foremost in industrialization at the beginning, suffered the most from the evils of industrialization. This explains why the extremely conservative English people finally promulgated laws causing a revolution in the development of their cities.

At a time when cities are “mushrooming” at an accelerated rate all over the world, Great Britain decides to move in the opposite direction, away from the large cities, to build small, lovely towns rooted in the country reflecting the character of the people living in them.

NOTE.—This paper by T. C. Coote was published in March, 1951, as *Proceedings-Separate No. 62*. The numbering of footnotes in this Separate is a continuation of the consecutive numbering used in the original paper.

<sup>8</sup> Prof., Technical University, Karlsruhe, Germany.

<sup>9</sup> “Garden City of To-morrow,” by Ebenezer Howard, Karlsruhe, Germany, November 6, 1951.

The aim of the modern British city builder is not the building of a city designed with compass and rule but the promotion and fostering of the organic growth of single parts of a great city that should support each other and together form a complete living unit.

This principle applies particularly to the planning of Greater London. Because of its unique position as the largest industrial and business center, the largest port, and at the same time the metropolis of the British Empire, the city of London grew at a rate out of proportion to the remainder of the British Island. It proved to be a loss for its citizens who first expected to profit from living in such a large city. The recreation facilities dwindled with increased building activity and daily commuting routes grew longer and longer. Transportation became slower and more dangerous, and the supply system grew more intricate. The great city became the object of modern crises to a greater extent than any other contemporary community.

Forceful means cannot relieve this situation. To cure the accumulated evils is a long hard process for which a clear understanding of the inherent causes of these evils is the first prerequisite. In London, the planned area was subdivided into four concentric rings:

1. The inside circle, containing the business zone and the port, with no housing to remain after complete reconstruction.
2. The suburban ring, containing mainly the existing housing. This ring would be left untouched as far as possible.
3. The "green ring" containing parks and agricultural land. The existing tendency of suburban housing to spread out into this ring would be stopped at any cost. The green ring will be sustained in its present state, except for thoroughways that must cross it.
4. The outside ring—the area of new planning. Here the discussion centered on the question of whether a uniformly thin housing or a concentration of houses at a few points is preferable. The decision was for the second alternative. These new developments would be either enlargements of existing small towns or "new cities."

Planning and construction of these new cities is the most interesting and most talked about part of the reconstruction program. The city dweller would be able to form a relationship with the soil, form small units of human society and, with his neighbors, work, as far as feasible in the plants of his own community. It means a return to the ideal of the ancient artisan—working and living under the same roof. The relation to the city proper will be quite loose (although excellent communication is planned) with the relationship more a spiritual connection than anything else. This ideal town reflects itself in many planned details: There will be no multiple-housing skyscrapers, but instead (in accordance with British tradition), two-floor, one-family houses built in small units, each surrounded by gardens rather than in monotonous endless rows, as found in some labor suburbs. Housing for 5,000 to 6,000 persons forms a "unit," and the layout of streets in such a unit prevents their use for through traffic. A family living in its house, away from the city traffic, facing its garden and its neighbors, is the final aim of the planning engineer.

The inner circle of London will retain its importance since it contains the residence of the King and the seat of the government and parliament. The city will remain the metropolis of culture and education, and the most important business and administration center and harbor of Great Britain.

An enormous amount of work is still necessary to achieve this aim. Streets and roads, already obsolete in Great Britain, must be reconstructed to fit Greater London; airports and railroads must be modernized or rebuilt; many buildings must be reconstructed; and parks and green areas must be planted to make the inner circle ring healthful and beautiful.

It is an astonishing fact that the preliminary work for this enormous program of reconstruction started during the most critical period of World War II. Delay of the planning for many years led to a thorough analysis of the problem. The design of new cities required extensive studies in different directions—agricultural soil analysis, subsidence due to mining, connections with existing road nets, water supply, gas, electricity, sewerage, and industrial development possibilities, to cite only the main problems.

The writer admires Great Britain for the fact that a radical change in its government did not impede the continuous development of its city planning and admires it for its clear and bold laws, providing, at least in theory, an excellent basis for reconstruction.

On the other hand, the writer must state that the real construction progress should follow the legislative action, and that planning phases lag far behind. Under the austerity program, construction was started only at a small part of the ring of new cities planned around London. The slow construction pace helps to eliminate errors that could be expected under a quicker tempo, and it gives plenty of time to try out new construction methods, but that does not help people looking for housing now. In addition, the "ring of green" (ring 3) is being constantly endangered by unplanned building. It may be that the main responsibility for the slow development rests with the corporation in charge of putting the program into effect—a corporation that is overorganized and overloaded with personnel. A heavy deterrent to new work is the "red tape," requiring that even the smallest development must be approved by the Ministry of Town and Country Planning. An efficient, expert regional planning organization, having the right and ability to make its own decisions, would be a better solution in many cases.

The idea of real cooperation between all concerned, as emphasized in British city planning, is excellent. This cooperation is not practiced only by governmental, economic, and scientific organizations, but is promoted among ordinary citizens. The idea of having a public relations man at each planning council in addition to the engineer, architect, geologist, and lawyer is very good. The public relations man does not simply contact newspapers and radio, but endeavors to give information regarding planning, progress of construction, and difficulties encountered in planning and construction to every person interested. It is this spirit of mutual help that makes the "Greater London Plan" and the "New Town Program" a cooperative program worthy of the British people.



THOMAS C. COOTE<sup>10</sup>.—Mr. Strickler implies that Ebenezer Howard's idea<sup>9</sup> of a self-contained town cannot be satisfied in the modern city. It is undoubtedly true of the British new towns that it will be impossible entirely to prevent commuting, and this will be especially true of the London new towns. However, the main aim will be to see initially that the typical wage earner is employed in the new town and also lives there. A grown-up daughter of his, however, might decide to teach somewhere else in the county and travel to work daily from her home in the new town. In the case of Corby, Aycliffe and Peterlee, it is thought that there should be relatively little commuting. Another point made by Mr. Strickler is that the new town will contain mainly two-floor, one-family houses, in small units, surrounded by gardens. This is largely true because there is an almost universal demand for the family house with a garden. The new town architects, however, are aware that this would result in a very monotonous appearance, and they are, in fact, breaking the horizontal line by building a number of apartment blocks, varying in height from ten floors at Harlow to three floors in Crawley. It is thought that the demand for apartments is not likely to be much more than 5% of the total accommodation to be provided. There will also be three-story blocks with shops on the street floor.

The lack of speed in construction has also been mentioned, with a suggestion that even the smallest detail of development is approved by the planning ministry. It is undoubtedly true that the speed of construction has lagged far behind what was originally thought possible, but this must be attributed first to the limitation imposed by the national capital investment program, and now to the need for rapid re-armament, which is affecting the availability of labor in the new towns. For some time, the Ministry has urged upon the corporations the need to submit proposals for development of rather large pieces of land at one time, and at the same time, to avoid frequent reference to the Ministry. This would have the effect also, of giving the corporations more autonomy.

Mr. Strickler has also referred to what he calls the small size of the new towns. It is interesting to note now that there is a general tendency to increase their size somewhat. Both Basildon and Harlow will now take 80,000 inhabitants each, instead of the 60,000 originally intended, and Crawley, too, may be larger than originally planned.

The discussion by Mr. Strickler is appreciated.

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<sup>10</sup> Senior Regional Planning Officer, Ministry of Town and Country Planning, London, England.

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